

How fair is it to say that nineteenth century Islam was the main enemy of new imperialism?

Islam as a religion posed a fundamental problem for European expansionists, when they tried to base their justifications for imperialism on the theme of a civilising mission. Where it was possible to claim that 'The African's nature is as plastic and impressionable as a child's - a blank sheet whereon we may write at will, without the necessity of first deleting old impressions'¹ - it was manifestly impossible to apply this standard to Islam. Inasmuch as it had been a factor in European politics for the previous 1000 years and had failed to be quelled by crusades, it was impossible to claim that by virtue of social Darwinism, Islam would soon be extinct. In fact, the contrary appeared to be the case, such that Islam was in many parts of Africa making more converts than Christian missions. Even in existing European colonies, the vigour and strength of local Muslim communities was increasing rapidly, as can be seen from British India and Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies. The success of Muslim missions in Africa was most difficult for Darwinist sociologists to explain, given their belief in the natural superiority of their race and belief-system. For many, Islam could clearly be seen as an improvement over the perceived barbarity of African society, especially before 1860. As even the distinguished explorer Sir Richard Burton put it, 'the Arab and the Negro combine better than the European and the black. Islam, by forbidding impure meats and spirituous liquors, by enjoining ablutions and decent dress, and by discouraging polygamy and polyandry, has improved the African's *physique*, and through it by inevitable consequence his *morale*'² The standard defence for Islam's apparent success was that as a religion it was better suited African temperament in that it imposed fewer new philosophies on converts. However, as sociological thought through the century progressed, this was increasingly seen as no defence at all since races and beliefs came to be measured for signs of progress - a progress which naturally European civilisation marked the apex of.

Yet it remained the uncomfortable fact for Christians that by the 1880s they were forced to admit that the apparently inherently-inferior doctrine of Islam was making more converts among the Africans than was Christianity. Missionaries had to grasp at straws and point out that Muslims bore the greater share for enslaving and oppressing the African; that it was a religion which pandered to male sensuality (where Christianity was 'the regenerator of society') and that its acceptance of polygamy was an insult to womankind which no Briton could stomach. Livingstone added that 'A great deal of the lawlessness of this quarter is the result of the slave-trade, for the Arabs buy whoever is brought to them, and in a country covered with forest as this is, kidnapping can be prosecuted with the greatest ease.'³ Such accusations carefully ignored the fact that Christian civilisation had only given up slavery 40 years previously, and that there were reports of similar activities being undertaken by Christian traders across Africa. Yet their target audience was not the segments of the European population with any knowledge of the realities of the situation, but the masses in the home country who had no knowledge of the truth yet nevertheless gave money to the missionary societies as much by way of humanitarian assistance as through religious zeal. The Church Missionary Society for instance had by 1856 an annual budget of £125,000 and each subscriber was entitled to speak at the monthly meetings of the General Committee. However but even the missionaries themselves considered propaganda denigrating Muslims as unhelpful. 'Mahometan Africans,' as one newspaper from 1884 put it, 'are described for the benefit of the un-travelled home-market as sunk in every kind of debauchery, disgusting sin and degradation.'⁴ Burton indeed described the Arabs of East Africa

¹ Bernard Porter: *The Lion's Share* p.72

² Bolt *Victorian Attitudes to Race* p.115

³ Oliver *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* p.32

⁴ Bolt *Victorian Attitudes to Race* p.115

as 'a truly noble race' whose open-handed hospitality showed up 'the niggardness of the savage and selfish African.'⁵ Instead, lessons had to be learned from the success of Islamic expansion, which could incorporate the traditional view that Islam was better suited to the temperament and barbarous morals of Africans. Praise was given to the Arabs for concentrating on secular education before conversion - where Christian missionaries asked too much and therefore courted failure. As an example, WL James praised the Christian Mission at Sanheit in the Sudan, but pointed out that its converts were virtually unemployable since they were outcasts from their own people and shunned by Muslims.⁶ Bishop Steere reinforced the failure of isolated mission-settlements when he said that 'since its residents had not ties with the outside world, they only produced a small impact on the religion of the surrounding area - especially since residents who lacked all the family and social ties were regarded by other Africans as more foreign than the Europeans.'⁷

Although it was not denied that missionaries found it much harder to carry out their work in areas of existing Islamic settlement - such as Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and India - than they did in more animist areas of the world, it is more difficult to find specific examples of Islamic resistance to the arrival of Europeans at all. One of these, however, was the empire of Samori Touré in Guinea - an empire based consciously on Islam. As with many powerful entities, the sheer coherence of the social structure protected it against foreign interference, a coherence demonstrated by the determination of the Japanese and Chinese governments to keep all missionaries out. In animist Africa, polities such as Mutesa's Buganda - which contained 2-3m people by 1870 - required missionaries to attend court as with any other suitor. However, Samori's empire also saw other benefits in Islam - principally the fact that Muslim Dyula traders already created a viable trading network for the economic future without need for European trade. The adoption of Islam by Samori did indeed harness a large number of his Malinké subjects to his régime, as can be seen from the fact that after the defeats to the French, Samori was able to evacuate his territory to the east. The uprooting of large populations ironically formed the prelude to similar population movements under colonial rule. The large armies he was able to raise inflicted serious defeats on the French in 1885 and 1895, as well as causing heavy casualties until 1898. Yet Samori's dealings with the French were not carried out in the name of Islam - instead remaining firmly in the realm of *realpolitik*. There was no call for *jihad-i asghar* against the invaders because they were non-believers, but instead military action was undertaken because they were invaders. The adoption of Islam in fact did not decisively alter the political structures inside Samori's empire and nor was it the cause of the improbable defeats he inflicted on the French. Much of the credit for Samori's military successes can instead be put down to the fact that the British sold him modern arms via Sierra Leone and Gold Coast. The steady increase in British presence on the mainland of West Africa also distracted French attentions away from his domains.

If Samori did not represent Islam in his opposition to direct imperialism encroaching on new territories, this is not to say that Islamic thought was not formulating its own response. Indeed, as Muslim states such as the Ottoman caliphate declined in the face of outside invaders, Muslims who were troubled by the constraints placed on the political expression of their faith, drew on their own traditions for guidance as to action. Across the world, there was a series of intellectually-led movements aiming to renew Islamic civilisation along the lines of the Prophet Muhammed (saw) and his *Sahaba*. Spiritually-led, traditional Muslim pre-occupations with textual guidance for right conduct, especially *tajdid* and *jihad-i akbar*, rose to the surface. This outlook reinforced Muslim thinkers in interpreting all outside problems as being essentially religious in

⁵ Oliver *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* p.31

⁶ Bolt *Victorian Attitudes to Race* p.117

⁷ Oliver *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* p.64

nature, since threatening economic and political interests are included as an attack on Islam. Even more apparently liberal and humanitarian aspects of colonial policy could be looked upon with suspicion, since no enemy could be acting in the best interests of Muslims - otherwise he would not be an enemy. Throughout Islamic history such situations of apparent danger from outside sources had always been approached from the standpoint of needing to increase Islamic knowledge among existing Muslims. It is not surprising to find that much of the overtly Islamic challenges to imperial rule came through movements are headed by a conspicuously pious leader. The rise of the Mahdi in Sudan was but one example of this trend. Although many Europeans saw this not as an Islamic rising but rather a doomed struggle of primitives versus civilisation - for Sudanese Muslims, the Mahdi represented a millenarian expectation for a man who 'will fill the earth with justice even as it has been filled with injustice.'⁸ The previous Egyptian expansion into Sudan had reconnected the country with its Islamic roots after long years outside the mainstream of Islamic culture, but it also destabilised the slave-trade and tribal basis of power, and introduced a new, professional 'ulama class trained at Cairo in competition to the Sufi brotherhoods. The wild religiosity which the coming of the Mahdi provoked was even recorded in the London *Evening Standard*, which on 4 March 1885 noted that 'On the other hand, the enthusiasm of the Dervishes, as the Mahdi's true followers are styled, appeared to be wrought to the highest pitch by the Prophet's fervent preaching, and to be in no way abated by the repeated checks they experienced before Omdurman.'⁹ Certainly few non-European nations inflicted such humiliating defeats on European armies in this period than the siege of Khartoum in 1885 in which General Gordon died. Even Kipling recorded that the fuzzy-wuzzies 'broke a British square.'

Yet the great majority of the new Muslim awakening did not take such violent courses, not least because much of it took place in parts of the world little affected by the new imperialism of after 1870 - since they were already firmly under colonial control. Close contact with the Europeans not only forced European missionaries to learn from Muslim methods, but also allowed the reverse to take place. Deoband was the first purpose-built *madrasah* in India, built along similar lines to the mission-schools of the missionary societies inasmuch as it encouraged the participation of people with no kin-ties, and it was popularly financed. As the first chancellor of the school said 'As long as the *madrasah* has not fixed sources of income, it will, *insh'allah*, operate as desire. And if it gain any fixed income, like *jagir* holdings, factories, trading interests, or pledges from nobles, then the *madrasah* will lose the fear and hope that inspire submission to God and will lose His hidden help.'¹⁰ So prudent was it managed by 1890 only an average of 42 rupees per student per year had been spent - a fact which was acclaimed with the words 'what jewels for cowries.'¹¹ Its use of examination and structured Arabic-based curriculum quickly attracted the best students not only from the United Provinces where it was based, but from all over India and indeed further afield. The use of the vernacular Urdu created a genuine and regular *lingua franca* for Muslims in India, and the wide dispersal of Islamic knowledge, based firmly on the Qur'an and *sunnah*. Such was its success that by 1880 there were 20 Deobandi daughter schools, reaching 8,934 by the centenary of the *madrasah* in 1967. Its effect was profound - creating a stream of graduates competent to reinvigorate the Muslim community across India. As Maulana Mahmudu'l-Hasan said in 1904 'In Hindustan previously knowledge was so scarce... that one could scarcely find someone to read the funeral prayers. And today knowledge is so widespread that every city, nay, every *qasbah*, indeed probably every village, has its own *maulawi* there.'¹²

⁸ Rotberg & Mazrui *Protest and Power in Black Africa* p.146

⁹ Rotberg & Mazrui *Protest and Power in Black Africa* p.166

¹⁰ Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.98

¹¹ Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.97

¹² Metcalf *Islamic Revival in British India* p.136

Whether this Muslim intellectual reform can be said to be a brake on new imperialism is difficult to say, since many areas which saw Islamic revivals - Malaya, Dutch East Indies and Algeria - were already under a colonial rule of some description. Certainly as the example of Samori Touré shows, Islam had little effect in dissuading well-armed European powers from attempting to seize political power. In fact, it was the Europeans themselves who fomented resistance of other territories to their neighbours. European intervention in some Muslim countries such as Egypt came about through deeply un-Islamic practices such as defaults on loans. Yet nevertheless, as an intellectual movement Islam vigorously resisted any European attempts to bring Western civilisation in the form of Christianity. British rule in India in fact co-opted the religious élites, after 1857, and allowed the dissemination of higher forms of Muslim and Hindu culture, while increasing the cultural divide between them. In France on the contrary, there was a deliberate attempt to destroy native religious institutions in order to assimilate Muslims into the French power-structure. The conspicuous failure of this policy can be seen by the figure that just 20,000 of the 4m Muslims in Algeria accepted French citizenship if it meant relinquishing their traditional legal codes as Muslims. The destruction of Islamic institutions in Algeria was described by Tocqueville, who said 'Around us the lights have gone out, the recruitment of men of religion and men of the law has ceased. We have in other words, made Muslim society far more miserable, disorganised, ignorant and barbarous than ever it was before it knew us.'¹³ Popular respect and enthusiasm for Islam remained constant in both Algeria and Tunisia despite Cardinal Lavignerie's best efforts. In British India, the vigour of both Islamic and Hindu traditions had been powerfully demonstrated during the Mutiny, and when Bryce justified the British Raj since 'no other sort of government would suit a vast population of different races and tongues, divided by religious animosities of Hindus and Musulmans, and with no sort of experience of self-government on a scale larger than a Village Council'¹⁴ - this still emphasised the strength of the religious differences due to the strength of belief. Hunt in the *Anthropological Review* of 1866 mentioned that 'Religion and philosophies are not accidents but the normal product, the necessary consequence of antecedent conditions.'¹⁵ Certainly on an intellectual level it was not possible for Christianity to see Islam as anything but a rival for the souls of the millions who sought spiritual succour after the difficulties posed by outsiders in areas. On a military level, Islam cannot be seen as the main threat to imperialists - a threat which came mostly from other European countries actively aiding different factions. On a cultural level, Islam did indeed pose a terrible challenge to the scientific racists inasmuch as by pure Darwinism, it often seemed possible that the masses of new conversions to Islam could have consigned Christianity to the cultural graveyard, not the other way round.

¹³ Ageron *Modern Algeria* p.21

¹⁴ Rich: *Race and Empire in British Politics* p.22

¹⁵ Burrow *Evolution and Society* p.129